

VZCZCXRO0004
OO RUEHAG RUEHDF RUEHIK RUEHLZ RUEHROV
DE RUEHDL #0191/01 0671704
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 081704Z MAR 07
FM AMEMBASSY DUBLIN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8046
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES IMMEDIATE
RUEHBL/AMCONSUL BELFAST IMMEDIATE 0549
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS IMMEDIATE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DUBLIN 000191

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [EINV](#) [EAIR](#) [MOPPS](#) [MARR](#) [IE](#)
SUBJECT: SCENE-SETTER FOR PRIME MINISTER BERTIE AHERN'S ST.
PATRICK'S DAY VISIT

DUBLIN 00000191 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (SBU) An imminent, potentially historic opportunity to restore the Northern Ireland Assembly sets the political backdrop for this year's St. Patrick's Day visit to Washington by Irish Prime Minister (Taoiseach, "TEE-shuck") Bertie Ahern. Building on the 2006 UK/Irish-brokered talks among the Northern political parties at St. Andrews in Scotland, Sinn Fein took an unprecedented step on January 28 to endorse policing in Northern Ireland. March 7 elections for the Northern Assembly do not have a final tally, but have likely positioned Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) chief Ian Paisley and Sinn Fein deputy leader Martin McGuinness to become First Minister and Deputy First Minister, respectively. The Irish and British Governments continue to press for restoration of the Assembly, and the Taoiseach will likely seek President Bush's support for that objective. We defer to Consulate Belfast for further analysis of developments in Northern Ireland.

The Domestic Political Background

¶2. (SBU) Ireland's national elections, likely to be held in mid-May, also color the political backdrop for the St. Patrick's Day discussions. Prime Minister Ahern, who is seeking a third consecutive five-year term, and his party, Fianna Fail ("FEE-na FALL"), are currently polling ahead of opposition rivals, though the gap has narrowed in recent weeks. Election issues that have loomed large in the parties' pre-election conventions include: health care, the environment, living costs, deficient public infrastructure, and income tax policy. In terms of immediate U.S. interests, the Government remains committed to facilitating U.S. military transits at Shannon and Dublin Airports (281,000 troops in 2006), despite opposition within the electorate to U.S. efforts in Iraq and lingering public suspicions about Ireland's involvement in extraordinary renditions. We do not expect this policy to change after the election, even if Fianna Fail were to lose.

Sustained Economic Success

¶3. (SBU) In 2006, the Irish economy remained a pacesetter in Europe, registering roughly five percent GDP growth and virtual full employment for the third consecutive year. Economic prosperity and the availability of jobs have attracted an estimated 300,000 (mostly Eastern European) migrants since 2004, reversing Ireland's long-standing image as a country of migrs. Roughly one in four migrants works in construction, and a potential vulnerability for the

economy is the slowdown now underway in the previously red-hot housing market, not unlike in the United States. Another concern is Ireland's ability to compete with low-cost economies, such as India and China, for U.S. foreign direct investment, the engine of Ireland's Celtic Tiger success. The Taoiseach's visit comes on the heels of high-profile layoffs at the Irish subsidiaries of U.S. industry leaders Motorola, Pfizer, and Procter & Gamble.

Bilateral Agenda Items

14. (SBU) GOI sources say that the Taoiseach will raise the following issues in his White House discussions:

Immigration. The Irish Government continues to consult with Congress and Irish-American groups on behalf of Irish residing illegally in the United States, variously estimated at between 5,000 and 50,000. Prime Minister Ahern will likely ask the White House to support the renewed efforts of Senators McCain and Kennedy to reintroduce an immigration bill that would regularize the status of these "illegals." The issue poses a domestic political problem for the Taoiseach, since families throughout Ireland are unable to bring home the illegals for funerals, weddings, etc., without risking their ability to return to their U.S. homes.

Open Skies. The Irish Government strongly supports the U.S.-EU air transport agreement that was initialed on March 2, which will create Open Skies in the U.S.-Irish market by March 2008. Ireland is concerned, however, that liberalization of air services at Heathrow Airport under the U.S.-EU accord may lead the UK to block the deal at the March 22-23 EU Transport Council meeting. The Taoiseach is meeting with Prime Minister Blair this week and may have insights as to what the British might need to accept the agreement.

Darfur. Ireland has been deeply engaged in Africa since the

DUBLIN 00000191 002.2 OF 002

missionary era, and the Irish Government has recently focused its diplomatic efforts on Darfur. Last July, Foreign Minister Dermot Ahern (no relation to the Taoiseach) visited Irish aid workers in Darfur and pressed leaders in Khartoum to accept UN peace-keepers as a replacement force for the current African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS). Foreign Minister Ahern is reportedly seeking a special diplomatic role for himself in a region of conflict, and his 2005 experience as Special Envoy for UN Reform and as a Northern Ireland negotiator would give him credibility on Darfur.

The Middle East. Ireland has welcomed the formation of a Palestinian National Unity Government (NUG) and supports EU overtures to the NUG to accept the Quartet Principles. The Irish Government and public have long-standing sympathies for the Palestinian cause, and the Taoiseach has led off discussions with past high-ranking USG visitors by expressing concern about perceived indiscriminate Israeli responses to Palestinian violence. Regarding Lebanon, Ireland joined the original UNIFIL force in the 1970s and contributed 150 troops to the bolstered UNIFIL mission last summer in the aftermath of the Israeli-Hizbollah conflict.

15. (SBU) The following items might also feature in discussions with the Taoiseach:

Renditions. The Irish Government strongly refuted a February report by the European Parliament alleging that Irish airports had hosted 147 suspected U.S. rendition flights. In response to Irish parliamentary calls for random inspections at Shannon Airport, Government leaders have cited earlier U.S. assurances that no such practice involves Ireland. At one point, Foreign Minister Ahern suggested reexamining the 1944 Chicago Convention in light of suspicions on rendition flights, but there have been no concrete moves by the Government to reopen the Convention.

Climate Change. Although the Irish public and media criticize the United States for remaining outside the Kyoto Protocol, Ireland's rapid economic growth has made it difficult for the country to meet its own Kyoto commitments. Ireland pledged under the Protocol to reduce emissions to 13 percent above 1990 levels by 2012, but emissions now stand at 25 percent above the 1990 threshold. In this context, the Government has welcomed Embassy proposals for a cooperative approach to climate change, and we are working on bilateral initiatives focused on ocean/wave energy, methane capture, and clean coal technologies.

Kosovo. Ireland strongly supports UN Special Envoy Ahtisaari's roadmap for Kosovo and also favors the integration of the western Balkans into the EU and trans-Atlantic community, pending necessary political reforms in the region. In August, Ireland will become the "Framework Nation" in a KFOR division that will include 270 Irish troops.

Afghanistan. Ireland, a NATO Partnership for Peace member, has seven military officers in Afghanistan, who serve in administrative roles. In response to Embassy requests to increase troop contributions, the Government agreed only to replace one administrative officer with an ordnance specialist, while extending the tours of assigned officers from four to six months.

FOLEY